

THE EVERGREEN.

Vol. VII.

JUNE, 1850.

No. 6.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF THE RIGHT REV. JOHN STARK RAVENSCROFT, D. D., FIRST BISHOP OF THE
DIOCESE OF NORTH CAROLINA.



I cannot do better, in presenting to our readers a biographical sketch of the subject of this memoir, than to give it in the language in which he has himself prepared it. At the earnest request of many of his friends, who thought that great good might be thus accomplished, Bishop Ravenscroft prepared a sketch of his life, which, without further comment, we give to our readers.

"THOUGH a native of Virginia, being born in the county of Prince George, in the year 1772, of which State my progenitors, as far back as I have been able to trace them, with the exception of my maternal grandfather, were also natives—my first recollections are of Scotland, my parents having removed from Virginia the same year in which I was born; and, after an interval of about two years spent in the north of England, purchased and settled finally in the south of Scotland, where my mother and two sisters still reside. Here I received the rudiments of my education; and I feel bound to record, that I owe much to the custom there established of making the Scriptures a school book—a custom, I am grieved to say it, not only abandoned in the schools and academies among us, but denounced as improper, if not injurious. Although I

was unconscious, at the time, of any power or influence over my thoughts or actions thence derived, yet what mere memory retained of their life-giving truths, proved of unspeakable advantage, when I became awakened on the subject of religion; and I am constrained to believe, that what was thus unconsciously sown in my heart, though smothered and choked by the levity of youth, and abused and perverted by the negligence and sinfulness of my riper years, was nevertheless a preparation of Heaven's foresight and mercy, for grace to quicken me—a mighty help to my amazed and confounded soul, when brought to a just view of my actual condition as a sinner, both by nature and by practice. Without this help, I might, like thousands of others, have wandered in a bewildered state, the prey of many delusions—engendered by the anxieties of a disturbed and ignorant mind, or by the fanaticism of those many well meaning, perhaps, but certainly most ignorant men, who yet venture to become teachers of religion. For this reason it is that I have been earnest, during my ministry, in pressing upon parents, and upon those who have the care of youth, the great duty of furnishing their tender and pliant minds with the treasures of divine knowledge and saving truth, contained in God's revealed word. No matter what specious arguments may be brought against the practice, we can reply, that it is a means of grace of God's own appointment, and one too which he has promised to bless and make effectual. No matter though it be objected, as it often is objected by the vain disputers of this world—that the minds of children can not comprehend such deep and unsearchable wonders—

God, we know, is able to open their understandings, and *out of the mouths of babes and sucklings to perfect praise*. No matter, though it be argued, that it is in vain, if not actually wrong, to force their minds to religion, and thus give them a distaste, and even an antipathy against it. Alas! what a flimsy subterfuge of unbelief and opposition to God; and yet what numbers are swayed by it! For, is it thought wrong, or even improper, to *force* their minds, if we must use the words, to any other branch of learning? and yet the danger of distaste, and even of antipathy, to human sciences, must be equally great. Besides, is not this distaste, and even antipathy, to divine things, the *natural* state of fallen creatures: and religion, the love of God, and goodness, a *forced*, that is, an unnatural state, to us spiritually dead and undone creatures, and therefore to be counteracted by every possible means? Let no parent, then, be led away by this infidel sophistry, to withhold religious instruction from the earliest years of his children, or to trust them in a school where the Bible is excluded as a class book.

"Having lost my father in my ninth year, it became necessary to return to Virginia, to look after the wreck of his property. In my seventeenth year, accordingly, I was separated from all I had ever known, and that was dear to me, and lauded in Virginia on New Year's day, 1789—a stranger to all around me, and in great part my own master—at least without any control I had been accustomed to respect. That under such circumstances I should quickly overcome those habits which the restraints of education had imposed, and wander after the lusts of my sinful heart, and the desires of my darkened eyes, is hardly to be wondered at. Wander indeed I did, not even waiting for temptation, but madly seeking it, and soon lost every early good impression, and even those fears and misgivings about futurity, of which all men are conscious occasionally.

"In looking back upon this period of my life, I think it may be profitable to advert to a circumstance which had great influence in confirming me in the sinful course I was pursuing. It being determined by my friends that I should turn my attention to the profession of the law, as presenting the fairest prospects of honor and emolument, I entered the college of William and Mary, that I might attend the law lectures of the celebrated Mr. Wythe, together with the other courses of scientific acquirement there taught. The plan was doubtless good, and might have been of the greatest advantage to my prospects in life, but by throwing me still more upon my own guidance, and increasing my means of self-indulgence, by the liberal allowance for my expenses, it increased in an equal degree the power of temptation, and I have to look back on the time spent in college as more marked by proficiency in extravagance, and juvenile vice, than in scientific attainment. Yet the means of

improvement were fully within my reach, and that I did not profit more, is wholly my own fault. The professors in the different departments were able men, and the regulations of the institution good in themselves, but they were not enforced with the vigilance and precision necessary to make them efficient, in that moral discipline so supremely important at this period of life. Except at the hours appropriated to the lectures, my time was at my own disposal; and though expected to attend prayers every morning in the college chapel, absence was not strictly noticed, and very slight excuses were admitted. Attendance at Church, on Sunday, was entirely optional, and the great subject of religion wholly unattended to. The students were required to board in college; but from the small number—not exceeding fifteen—from the low price of board, and the constant alterations with the steward—the public table was given up, and the students permitted to board in taverns, or elsewhere, as suited them. This every way injurious, and most unwise permission, presented facilities for dissipation which would not otherwise have been found; and encouraged as they were by the readiness with which credit was obtained from persons whose calculations were formed on the heedlessness and improvidence of youth, temptation was divested of all present impediment to its power. This last is an evil which I believe attends all seminaries of learning, and forms one of the greatest obstacles to their real usefulness, and one of the most fruitful nurseries of vice. As such, it ought to be met and resisted by the whole power of the community, and by the arm of the law inflicting severe pecuniary penalty, independent of the loss of the debt contracted—and even imprisonment of the person convicted of giving credit to a student at any college, or other public seminary of learning. Some such provision, it appears to me, is essential to the public usefulness of such institutions; and if enforced with due vigilance by the professors, in whose name, and at whose instance, the prosecution should be carried on, would go far to counteract this increasing mischief. And when it is considered that the practice of giving credit to minors under such circumstances, is a stab at the very vitals of society, hardly any penalty can be considered too severe.

"While I thus walked according to the course of this world, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, the customs and manners of genteel society imposed some degree of restraint upon my outward deportment; and the respect I really entertained for some excellent persons, who favored me with their notice and regard, preserved me from open debauchery. Strange creatures! we can submit to some restraint, and command ourselves to some self-denial, for the praise of man that is a worm, while we madly defy the omnipotent God! We can be influenced by the fear of a fellow-creature, while there is no fear of God before our eyes.

What other proof do we need to convince us that we are fallen creatures, spiritually dead, and must continue such, unless quickened into life by God the HOLY GHOST?

"These restraints, however, could not have continued to operate for any length of time against the natural tendency of vice to wax worse and worse; and that I became not totally and irrecoverably sunk in its ruinous depths, I owe, under God, to a most excellent woman, who consented to become my wife in my 21st year. This event gave a new direction to the course of my life. I abandoned the study of law and embraced a country life, devoting myself to agricultural pursuits. Thus removed from the temptations and facilities to vice, which our cities and towns present so readily, with regular and pleasant occupation on my farm, and my domestic happiness studied and promoted by the affectionate partner of my life—my years rolled on as happily—were the present life alone to be provided for—as could reasonably be desired. The personal regard I entertained for my wife, increased to the highest esteem, and even veneration, as the virtues of her character opened upon me, while the prudence and discretion of her conduct won me gradually from my previous dissipated habits. She was a woman of high principle and of a very independent character: what she did not approve of, she would not smile upon; yet she never gave me a cross word, or an ill-natured look in her life, and in the twenty-three years it pleased God to spare her to me, such was her discretion, that though I often acted otherwise than she could have wished me to do, and though she was faithful to reprove me, there never was a quarrel or temporary estrangement between us. *She opened her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue was the law of kindness.* So that when she left me for a better world, it was an exceeding comfort to me that I could look back upon so little to reproach myself with, respecting her; only this, that but for the last five years of our union, had I any sense of her real value, or of God's goodness in giving her to me, or any communion with her in the love of that Saviour, who had been her hope and trust through life, (though she was not formally a professor—the Church in which she was baptised having been cast down before she came to years of discretion)—and who was her stay and support in the hour of death. 'O how good it is,' would she say to me as I watched by her dying bed, 'to have a Saviour, and such a Saviour?'

"But though my marriage certainly produced a great change in my outward conduct, I was nevertheless as far from God as ever; without even a thought of religion, or once opening the Bible for eighteen years, to learn what God the LORD should say, or once bending my knees in prayer to him, on whom my all depended; and though twice in this time brought to the gates of death by sickness, yet no uneasy thought of hereafter disturbed my mind.

So true is the expression of the Psalmist that *the wicked hath no bands in death.* So great was my neglect, in fact disrespect, of even the outward forms of religion, that from the year 1792 to the year 1810, I was not present at any place of public worship more than six or seven times, and then not from choice, but from some accidental accommodation to propriety, in surrendering to the opinions of others.

"Indeed the kind of preaching I had it in my power to hear, was not of a description to engage the attention of any informed mind. I soon found that I knew more of the Scriptures from memory than the preachers, and was vain enough to think that I understood them better and could apply them more correctly, than the well-meaning perhaps, but certainly most ignorant, unqualified, and of course injurious men, who appeared around in the character of ministers of religion. But as I had no spiritual senses as yet quickened in me, the preaching of the cross, even from an angel, would have been to me as to the Greeks of old—foolishness. Oh what a miracle of long suffering, that in all this time God was not provoked to cut me off! What a miracle of grace, that I am permitted to think and speak of it, and to adore the riches of his mercy, in bringing me to a better mind!

"It was in the year 1810 that it pleased God to set my mind at work, and gradually to bring me to doubt the dark security of my unawakened state. But I am not conscious of any peculiar incident or circumstance, that first led me to considerations of the kind.

"As I was the manager of my own estate, which comprised a set of mills, as well as a plantation, about two miles distant from each other, I was of course much alone, at least in that kind of solitude which gives the mind opportunity to commune with itself. It was in my rides from one to the other, and while superintending the labors of my people, that a train of thought, to which I was previously altogether unaccustomed, began to occupy my attention, and though dismissed once and again would still return, and with every return would interest me more and more. That the train of thought thus suggested, concerned my condition as an accountable creature, will be readily imagined, as also, that on the review I found it bad enough. This it was no difficult thing for me to feel and to admit, nor as yet did there appear much difficulty in reforming what I could not justify.

"An impatient and passionate temper, with a most sinful and hateful habit of profane swearing, in which I was a great proficient, were my most open and besetting sins. These, however, I considered as within my own control, and as such, set forthwith about amending them, but without any reliance upon God for help, or without much if any impression that it was at all needful. In this endeavor at reformation, which it pleased God thus to permit me to make, I went on prosperously for a season,

and began to pride myself in that self-command I seemed to possess. But my own weakness was yet to be showed me, and when temptation again assailed me, all my boasted self-command was but as a rush against the wall. I surrendered to passion, and from passion to blasphemy. When I came to reflect upon this, then it was that, for the first time in my life, I was sensible of something like concern—some consciousness of wrong beyond what was apparent. But without waiting to examine farther, I hastily concluded to exert myself more heartily, and yet to command myself thoroughly.

"During these my endeavors, however, the Scriptures were more and more the object of my attention, and from them I began gradually to discover (what I was very loth to admit) the true state and condition of human nature. What little I had lately come to know of myself, however, and all that I knew of the world, seemed to rise up as strong proofs that the doctrine of natural depravity was true. Willing, however, to escape from it, I resorted to the shelter of too many among us—that what we find in the Scriptures is *figuratively* expressed, and is, therefore, not to be taken in the strictness of the letter. But my own experience was to be the expositor of the word. Again and again were my self-righteous endeavors foiled and defeated, much as at the first; and humbled and confounded, I became alarmed at what must be the issue—if I was thus to remain the sport of passions I could not command, the prey of sin I could not conquer. Something like prayer would flow from my lips, but it was the prayer of a heart that yet knew not aright its own plague. One more effort was to be made, and with great circumspection did I watch over myself for some weeks. Still did I continue, however, my search in and meditation upon the Scriptures: and here it was that I found the benefit my early acquaintance with them. I had not to look afar off for their doctrines, they were familiar to my memory from a child; I had known them thus far, though now it was that their living proof was to be experienced. The whole, I believe, was to be made to depend on my acquiescence in the turning point of all religion—that we are lost and undone, spiritually dead and helpless in ourselves—and so I found it.

"Again and dreadfully did I fall from my own steadfastness—temptation like a *mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine*, swept my strength before it, carried away my resolutions as Sampson did the gates of Gaza. I returned to the house convinced of my own helplessness, of my native depravity, and that to spiritual things I was incompetent. I now found of a truth that *in me dwelt no good thing*. I threw myself upon my bed in my private room—I wept—I prayed. Then was showed unto me my folly in trusting to an arm of flesh. Then did it please the LORD to point my bewildered view to him who is *the LORD our righteousness*.

Then was I enabled in another strength to commit myself unto his way. From that moment my besetting sin of profane swearing was overcome, and to this moment has troubled me no more. But much was yet to be done, which the same gracious friend of poor sinners continued to supply; and to lead me step by step, to proclaim his saving name, and declare his mighty power openly to the world.

"In making an outward profession of religion, I acted as multitudes, alas, do, without considering that any thing depended on my being a member of the Church of CHRIST, or that any difficulty existed as to what was and what was not truly such. In choosing between the different denominations into which the Christian world is split up, I considered nothing more to be necessary than agreement in points of faith and practical religion, with such a system of discipline as was calculated to promote the peace and edification of the society. This I thought I found in a body of Christians called *Republican Methodists*; and influenced in no small degree by personal friendship for one of their preachers, Mr. John Robinson, of Charlotte county, my wife and myself took membership with them. At this time, however, they had no church organized within reach of my dwelling, only a monthly appointment for preaching at one of the old Churches, eight miles distant.

"It was not very long, however, before this want was supplied in the gathering together of a sufficient number to constitute a Church according to their rule, in which I was appointed a lay elder, and labored for the benefit of the members by meeting them on the vacant Sundays, and reading to them such printed discourses as I thought calculated to instruct and impress them; and these meetings were well attended, considering the prevalent delusion on the subject of preaching, and the wide and deep objection to prepared sermons.

"When I had been engaged in this way about three years, increasing in knowledge myself, as I endeavored to impart it to others, I gradually began to be exercised on the subject of the ministry, and to entertain the frequently returning thought, that I might be more useful to the souls of my fellow-sinners than as I then was, and that I owed it to God. To this step, however, there appeared objections insurmountable, from my worldly condition, and from my want of public qualifications. Yet I could not conceal from myself, that if the men with whom I occasionally associated, and those of whom I had obtained any acquaintance as ministers of religion, were qualified to fill the station, I was behind none, and superior to most of them, in acquired knowledge, if not in Christian attainment. My objections were, therefore, chiefly from my personal interests, and personal accommodation, cloaked under the want of the necessary qualifications for a public speaker, and some obscure views of the great responsibility of the office. I felt that I dreaded it, and, therefore, did not encourage either the private

exercises of my own mind, or the open intimations of my brethren. Yet I could not escape from the often returning meditation of the spiritual wants of all around me, of the never to be paid obligation I was under to the divine mercy, and of the duty I owed to give myself in any and in every way to God's disposal.

"Of this I entertained no dispute; yet the toils and privations, the sacrifices of worldly interest, and the contempt for the calling itself manifested by the wealthier and better informed classes of society, which I once felt myself, and now witnessed in others, were a severe stumbling-block; and I was willing to resort to any subterfuge to escape encountering it. Yet I would sometimes think, that a great part of this was more owing to the men than to the office."

Thus abruptly terminates this interesting narrative, to the composition of which Mr. Ravenscroft devoted the intervals of strength and leisure that he enjoyed during his last illness. Among the memoranda to which he referred in the preparation of it, is found one written by himself, in the year 1819, which is here subjoined, as a continuation of the history of his motives and views in entering the ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the causes of his dissatisfaction with the communion to which he had first attached himself.

"In the year 1815, being much exercised on the subject of the ministry, and believing myself called to a public station in the Church, as well as pressed by the solicitations of my brethren, I began to revolve the question of orders in my mind, and to seek for information on a subject which I felt was of the last consequence to my comfort, and I may say usefulness as a minister of CHRIST, viz. the *authority* by which I should be commissioned to perform the duties of the ministry. To rest it upon the assurance I felt, that I was called of God to the work, was personal to myself, but could not weigh with others beyond my own opinion; and something more than that was essential to prevent me from feeling myself an intruder into the sacred office.

"On mentioning my difficulty to the pastor of the congregation to which I belonged, an able and sensible, though not a learned man, I found that it was a question he could not entertain, being, like Dissenters in general, little if at all impressed with the importance (not to themselves alone, but to those under their charge,) of valid and authorized ministrations in the Church. Being thus left to my own resources, and the word of God, I became fully convinced that the awful deposit of the Word, by which we shall all be judged, could never be thrown out into the world to be scrambled for, and picked up by whosoever pleased to take hold of it; and though this objection might in some sort be met by

the manifestation of an internal call, yet as that *internal call* could not now be demonstrated to others, something more was needed, which could only be found in the *outward* delegation of authority, from that source to which it was originally committed. Of the necessity of this verifiable authority to the comfort and assurance of Christians in the present day, the Sacrament of Baptism presented itself to me as demonstrative truth. Being the only possible mode by which fallen creatures can become interested in the covenant of grace, and entitled to the benefit of CHRIST's gracious undertaking for the salvation of sinners, it must be of the last importance to parents and children to be satisfied and assured that such unspeakable blessings should be authoritatively conveyed. And as the authority of CHRIST is the very essence of Baptism, in the assurance of its pledges to those to whom it is administered, and as this assurance can only be such by the verification of the requisite power and authority to administer the rite, it appeared clear to me, that no assumption of that power by any man, or body of men, neither any consequent delegation of it, could by any possibility answer the intention and purpose of the Author and Finisher of our faith, in making Baptism the door of admission into his Church,

"In this view of the subject, I was compelled to lay before the district meeting of the Republican Methodist Church, so called, my reasons for requiring an authority to minister in the Church of CHRIST, which they had not to give, and to request a letter of dismission from their communion. This was granted me by the congregation of which I was a member, in the most friendly and affectionate manner. The other dissenting denominations among us I found in the same situation; all of them, according to my view, acting upon usurped authority; though I paused a while on the *Presbyterian* claim to apostolic succession—but as that claim could date no farther back than the era of the Reformation, and in its first lines labors under the dispute whether it has actually the authority which *mere Presbyters* can bestow, (for it does not appear satisfactorily that Calvin ever had orders of *any* kind,) I had to turn my attention to the Protestant Episcopal Church for that deposit of apostolical succession, in which alone verifiable power to minister in sacred things was to be found in these United States. *or any where*

"I presented myself accordingly to Bishop Moore, in the city of Richmond, together with my credentials, and was by him received as a candidate for holy orders. The canons of the Church requiring that persons applying for orders shall have their names inscribed in the books, as candidates for one year previous to their ordination, I was furnished by Bishop Moore with letters of licence as a lay-reader in the Church, which are dated the 17th of February, 1816. Having labored during the year in the parishes of Cumberland, in Lunenburg county,

and of St. James, in the county of Mecklenburg, with acceptance, and, by the blessing of God, with effect, particularly in St. James' parish, I was most earnestly invited to take charge of the latter congregation, as their minister. This invitation I accepted; and having received the necessary testimonials from the Standing Committee of the Diocese, and passed the requisite trials, I was admitted to the office of Deacon in the Church, on Friday, the 25th day of April, 1817, in the Monumental Church, in the city of Richmond; and for reasons satisfactory to the Bishop and Standing Committee of the Diocese, by virtue of the canon in such case made and provided, I was admitted to the order of Priest; and ordained thereto in the Church in the town of Fredericksburg, on Tuesday, the 6th day of May following, during the session of the Convention in that place. On returning to my parish, deeply impressed with the awful commission intrusted to me, and with the laborious task of rescuing from inveterate prejudice the doctrines, discipline, and worship of the Church, and of reviving among the people that regard for it, to which it is truly entitled, I commenced my ministerial labors, as the only real business I now had in life, relying on God's mercy and goodness, through the LORD JESUS CHRIST, for fruit to his praise."

Mr. Ravenscroft's character as a Christian was fully appreciated by the little flock over which he was now the overseer, and his labors as a minister were attended with very gratifying success. At the time that he first connected himself as a lay-reader with it, the Liturgy of the Church was entirely unknown, except in one family; and in fifteen months afterwards he had a large congregation of "attentive hearers and devout worshippers," who erected for their use a commodious place of public worship. To some, however, his preaching was very offensive, and brought upon him that reproach to which the faithful minister of CHRIST has been liable in every period of the world. To the rich and worldly-minded, especially, to whom he had been so long allied in feeling and in practice, he now addressed his most heart-searching appeals, and familiar as he was with all their shifts and evasions, he exposed them to themselves with a fidelity and truth of coloring which they could not tolerate. Preaching of this kind, which they knew not how to resist, they affected to despise, and this faithful minister, though never deterred for a moment from revealing the whole of God's will, was much and often grieved at the deadness and coldness of this class of his hearers. To those, too, from whom he differed in opinion respecting the constitution of the Church, he often gave serious offence; and in one of the congregations which he served he met from this source with many painful impediments. But with a remarkable self-devotion

and decision of character, he pursued the tenor of his way, alike undismayed by the reproaches of his adversaries, and unchanged by the admiration of his friends. He seems to have been actuated by an unbounded sense of God's mercy towards himself, and to have thought the dedication to his service of all the energies of his body and mind, far from being an adequate acknowledgement of the divine bounty: doubtless the recollection of the many years, during which his talent had been buried, added to his diligence in preparing for the coming of his LORD.

Having lost his first wife in the year 1814, Mr. Ravenscroft was married to his second wife in the year 1818. This lady, to whom he was ever a most affectionate husband, and whose consistent Christian character was at once a comfort and an aid to him during their union, was Miss Buford, of Lunenburg county, the daughter of one of his oldest friends. In the ensuing winter he sustained a severe loss by fire, having had his dwelling house, and all it contained, burnt during his absence from home. This loss, joined to his profuse generosity, and probably his diminished attention to his secular affairs after he entered the ministry, reduced considerably the value of his estate, and after this period he was, in part, dependent upon the support which he derived from his connection with his parish.

His attention to the duties of his calling, which he suffered nothing to divert, was indeed remarkable. His punctuality as a minister, for instance, was so exact, that during the whole time he officiated as deacon and priest, he was never known to fail in keeping an appointment. Relying, with a confidence which ultimately became fatal, upon the vigor and stability of his constitution, he set at naught all kinds of weather, while engaged in duties that called him from home. Even when the weather was so inclement that he would not permit his servant, who acted as the sexton to his churches, to accompany him, he would himself take the keys and ride off alone five or ten miles to the regular place of worship, without, perhaps, the slightest expectation of meeting an individual, and sometimes, as he used to express himself, "would ride around the Church when the snow was a foot deep, and leave his track as a testimony against his people." This seemingly supererogatory exposure of himself he found necessary for some members of his congregation. "If," said he, "they could say with any sort of plausibility—the weather is bad to-day, and Mr. Ravenscroft will not turn out, the consequence would be that the slightest inclemency would avail them as an excuse for staying at home; but I put a stop to all such evasions, by being always at Church, let the weather be what it may, and they can always calculate with certainty upon meeting me if they choose to turn out themselves."

In the year 1823, Mr. Ravenscroft received an invitation to take charge of the large and flourish-

ing congregation at Norfolk. Not conceiving that any call of duty accompanied this invitation, he promptly declined it, "as nothing in the shape of emolument could move him from where he was, and induce him to sacrifice his predilections and attachment to his own little flock." Shortly afterwards, however, he received a call from the vestry of the Monumental Church, in Richmond, to be the assistant to the venerable Bishop Moore, who had charge of that congregation. Regarding the services of the Bishop, which were seriously interrupted and hindered by his large parochial charge, as too valuable to the diocese to be lost through any impediment opposed by his private inclinations, Mr. Ravenscroft was preparing to yield to what he considered as an imperative call of duty, and to accept this invitation—when a call of a yet more imperative nature reached him from another quarter, which his conscience, that great master-spring to all his actions, at once forbade him to reject.

The Church in North Carolina had shared the same fate, during the Revolutionary war, that had involved all other portions of it in this country in so much gloom and depression. The violent prejudices—to the injustice of which it is hardly necessary now to recur—which had brought odium and persecution upon its ministers elsewhere, existed here in their full vigor. The effect, indeed, of these prejudices seems to have been more remarkable in North Carolina than any where else. The cry of "Down with it, down with it even to the ground," accomplished the wishes of the enemies of the Church; and long after Zion had arisen from the dust, and put on her beautiful garments, in other portions of her borders, her children here had still to weep when they remembered her.

It was not until the year 1817, that the three clergymen who had but recently been called to the towns of Fayetteville, Wilmington, and Newbern, encouraged by some influential laymen in the two first mentioned towns, proposed a convention for the purpose of organizing the Church in this State. A Convention was accordingly held in Newbern, in the month of June of that year, attended by three clergymen and six or eight lay delegates; when a constitution was adopted, and an address made to the friends of the Church throughout the State, proposing a second convention in the ensuing year. This second Convention was more numerous attended than the former, and the Church from that time continued rapidly to increase—or, to speak more properly, perhaps—to revive from her long and deadly torpor.

Under the patriarchal supervision of the venerable Bishop of Virginia, who was invited by the Convention to take episcopal charge of the diocese, this increase assumed a stable and progressive character, and within six years from the time of the first Convention, there were twenty-five congregations attached to the Church. This numerical force, however, exhibits rather an exaggerated view of the

real condition of the diocese. Some well-meaning but injudicious missionaries, under the influence of that fervor of feeling usually attendant upon a state of prosperity, had formed nominal congregations where there were in fact very few or no Episcopalians. Bishop Moore's engagements in Virginia, both to the diocese and to his parish, never allowed him time to visit these congregations, and discover their actual condition; and after remaining some time unfruitful branches of the main stock, and appearing from a distance to add to its strength, they at length withered and fell off, from the want of that vital principle which they had never possessed. And even in the more established and better informed congregations, there were many individuals who had attached themselves to the Church from motives entirely distinct from a discerning and rational preference for her peculiar character. Hereditary predilections, convenience, and accidental circumstances, afforded a sufficient motive with many; while comparatively few had been led to a candid examination, and a consequent acknowledgement of her distinctive claims.

The number of clergymen was small, in proportion to the extent of country over which the friends of the Church were scattered; and even of that small number, there were some who, acting under that notion of charity which teaches us to shrink from the search of truth, lest, when found, it should show our neighbor to be in error, avoided the urging of claims which were unpalatable to so many.

These spots of unsoundness in a body otherwise healthy and vigorous, evidently required excision; and the more intelligent friends of the Church began to look around for some more skilful and steady hand to which the operation should be intrusted. The peculiar state of feeling engendered by the existence of these loose opinions, both in the members of the Church themselves, and in others, obviously demanded that the agent of reform should possess nerve, as well as skill, and not be deterred from his duty, either by the reproaches of the looker-on, or by the timidity and alarms of the patient. The character of Mr. Ravenscroft, (for he was at this time personally known to but one clergyman in the diocese,) as exemplified by the manner and success of his preaching, appeared to be happily adapted to this emergency. Ardent in his personal piety, zealous in preaching the Gospel in its utmost purity, disinterested in all his aims, and possessing in no ordinary degree talents for pulpit and pastoral usefulness, it was believed that the uncompromising firmness with which he beld and preached the *whole* of God's revealed will, would at least receive the meed of praise for sincerity and single-heartedness, even from his opponents; while the sheep of his own fold would be reclaimed from those mazes of error and ignorance into which other shepherds might not have had the hardihood to follow them. This view of Mr. Ravenscroft's fitness for the station operating upon the leading members of the

Convention of 1823, and a high respect for his character as a Christian and a minister, influencing others, he was unanimously elected Bishop of the diocese of North Carolina, at a Convention held in Salisbury, and attended by all the clergy and an unusually full delegation of laymen. He did not hesitate in accepting a call which he regarded as being in a peculiar manner a providential one. Personally known to scarcely an individual of the Convention which had unanimously elected him Bishop, it seemed to him "as if the band of Providence was in it;" and though the same distrust of himself, that had awakened in him so many doubts respecting his fitness for the ministry at all, yet operated in making him lay aside all self-reliance, the same submission to the leadings of his great Master, and the same confiding trust in his sustaining grace, made him determine at once to follow the difficult path now opened to him. His election having preceded the sitting of the General Convention but a few weeks, he was furnished with the requisite testimonial to be laid before that body preparatory to his consecration, and accordingly received his high commission, in the city of Philadelphia, on the 22d day of April, 1823, at the hands of the venerable Bishop White, Bishops Griswold, Kemp, Croes, Bowen, and Brownell, being also present, and assisting.

The pecuniary ability of the Church in North Carolina being but limited, the Convention in offering what they were able to give, allowed Mr. Ravenscroft the privilege of devoting one-half of his time to the service of a parish, so that the conjoined means of the Diocese and the parish might afford a decent and adequate income. The neglect of his private affairs, which has already been hinted at, proceeding from Mr. Ravenscroft's engrossing attention to his ministerial duties, added to some losses sustained by him as surety for others, had now reduced his once ample means so much, that he was obliged to avail himself of this privilege; and the congregation at Raleigh inviting him to take the pastoral charge of them, he consented to do so, and immediately upon his return from Philadelphia, began his preparations for removal. Knowing, however, how urgent the wants of the Church were, he did not wait for the completion of his preparations, but set out on his first Episcopal tour in June, within one month after his consecration. It would extend this memoir to an undue length to enter into a minute narration of Bishop Ravenscroft's movements in this, or indeed, in any of his subsequent visitations; it is designed only to give such occasional extracts from his private journal and correspondence, as are either instructive in point of doctrine, or more than ordinarily interesting in point of fact.

One of Bishop Ravenscroft's earliest endeavors after assuming the care of his Diocese, was to impress upon both his clergy and the people of their

charge, a proper estimation of the sacrament of Baptism and its consequent, the apostolic rite of confirmation. These be regarded as the threshold of the Church, and when duly administered and worthily received, would guard the body of the Church from the intrusion of the unprepared. "I consider," says he, in a letter to one of his clergy, "in general terms, Confirmation equivalent to a profession of religion on conviction and experience." And to another he says, "from the nature of things, it is impossible that I can have any knowledge of the qualifications of the persons who offer themselves for Confirmation. I must therefore depend entirely upon your diligence in preparing, and faithfulness in presenting those only of your charge who have a just view of the rite, and are properly impressed with the obligations growing out of it, and the benefits to be derived from it. Much obloquy has heretofore grown out of the easiness with which candidates for confirmation have been presented and received by the Church, and occasion has thence been taken against us by our opponents. This I feel extremely anxious to avoid, and as no lax habits in this respect have yet obtained in the Diocese, so to commence and continue by the blessing of God, that they may be prevented from creeping in." His views on Baptism have been already given at large, and need not be here repeated.

During his first visitation, and in the interval occurring between it and the ensuing Convention, the Bishop discovered in its full extent the actual condition of the Church, as it has already been described. He saw, that as a faithful overseer, it was his duty, however painful it might be to himself, and however offensive to others, to correct the mistakes into which so many of his flock had fallen—to apprise them of the duties resulting from their connection with a Church which was founded upon the primitive model, and to open their eyes to that delusive notion of charity, which, in its natural consequences, must eventually lead to the acknowledgment of all error. He accordingly opened the deliberations of the first Convention after his consecration with a sermon containing his views and opinions regarding the Church, and the most efficient means of promoting its increase and prosperity, and unreservedly communicating the details of the course which he, as its guardian and Bishop, meant to pursue.

The fatigue and exposure incident to the situation in which the Bishop was now placed, added to the anxiety of mind necessarily attending it, began very soon to make an impression upon his once robust frame and vigorous constitution, and during the whole of the second winter after his removal to North Carolina, he was confined by illness. Besides "the care of all the Churches," which, to a mind so solicitous as his, respecting every thing that concerned their well being, was a source of

constant and corroding anxiety, the mere physical labor of his annual visitations was very great. The farthest western congregation was more than three hundred miles distant from the most eastern one, and yet, long after disease had established its empire in his enfeebled frame, he punctually and resolutely made his yearly visits to both, and it was not until he became utterly incapable of travelling, a short time previously to his death, that he discontinued them. United to these labors were his laborious and zealous services to his congregation at Raleigh as a parish priest, occupying the whole of his time not devoted to his active Episcopal duties.

But even his hours of sickness and confinement were not hours of idleness. Just before his first illness he had been invited to preach before the Bible Society at its annual meeting, in December, at the city of Raleigh, although he had openly expressed his disapprobation of one feature in the constitution of the society. Availing himself of the occasion, he explained his objections, and gave in general his views of the proper principle upon which Bible Societies should be founded to be most efficient in their operations. This sermon having been published, elicited very severe animadversions from various quarters, and eventually attracted the notice of a celebrated professor of theology in Virginia. That gentleman in his strictures upon the sermon, and the publications arising out of it, having assailed the Church of which Bishop Ravenscroft was a member and a minister, the Bishop felt himself imperiously called upon to stand forth to vindicate it from his aspersions. Though worn by a severe and protracted illness, the result of his labors was a masterly and triumphant *vindication of the doctrines of the Church*. This able controversial tract will be found alike valuable to the learned churchman and to the unlearned Christian; to the former, as a clear and comprehensive summary of the learned labors of the fathers, and the brightest luminaries of the Church; to the latter, as a plain and irrefragable argument, establishing the divine authenticity of those ministrations upon which he relies as means for his spiritual sustenance.

The Bishop's health was never perfectly renovated after this first severe attack, but his constitution, originally hardy and vigorous, frequently rallied and restored him to his usual activity; the dedication of which intervals to his Episcopal labors would in turn reduce him for a time to sickness and confinement. The last three or four years of his life consisted almost wholly of these alternations of suffering sickness at home and active industry abroad.

The increasing infirmities of the Bishop made it necessary for him, in the beginning of the year

1828, to give up the pastoral charge of the congregation at Raleigh, which, under his fostering care had grown into an importance which required more active and uninterrupted service than his declining health and engagements to the diocese permitted him to bestow. The large congregations of Newbern and Wilmington were both desirous of procuring his valuable pastoral services, interrupted and hindered as they were; and accordingly at this time he received from each of those congregations an invitation to become its pastor, but he ultimately selected the village of Williamsborough, to which he had been also invited, as his future residence. The congregation there was small, and having never had the benefit of regular services, he thought it better able to withstand the injurious effects of interrupted ministrations.

It pleased God about this time to deprive Bishop Ravenscroft of the whole of his worldly substance, by that means which had become so general in this country. The same benevolent disposition which prompted him to dedicate his life so zealously to the service of his fellow creatures, had induced him at various times to become the security for others in pecuniary transactions, and the issue was his utter ruin. The details of this unfortunate business it is not necessary to relate. Suffice it to say, that he met with kind friends, and in his own bosom found a source of comfort which made him rise superior to his misfortunes, and, like the courser that has shaken off his encumbrances, to run his race with renovated speed and vigor.

One earthly tie yet remained to him, besides his connection with and attachment to the Church, and that also it pleased God to sever. Soon after his removal to Williamsborough, the health of his wife, which had been for some time feeble, began rapidly to decline, and in January, 1829, her sickness and sufferings terminated in death. A life spent in the diligent discharge of the various duties belonging to her station, was closed by a death full of the hope of immortality, and it was a source of great comfort to her husband, that during the last stages of her illness, not one cloud of doubt obscured the brightness of her heavenly prospect, and that (to use his own language) "there was not even a distorted feature in the agonies of death, to betray any quailing before the king of terrors." The severance of this last earthly bond was to the Bishop a severe trial. Besides losing an affectionate friend and a faithful counsellor in his wife, the precarious and delicate state of his own health made him peculiarly sensitive to the loss of a gentle and tender companion and nurse. But even this severe chastisement was not to him without its mitigations. The poverty to which he was reduced in his old age, bad only affected him as it rendered it probable that his early death, to which he already began to look forward, would leave Mrs. Ravenscroft in want. The removal of this apprehension by the death of his wife, though it might render the evening of his

days lonely and irksome, at once released him from all earthly anxieties; and in speaking of his loss, this thought, next to the consolations of religion, seemed to have been uppermost.

The convention of 1829, sensible of the increasing infirmities of Bishop Ravenscroft, and of the great necessity of relieving him of a portion of his laborious duties, determined to release him from all parochial charge. Notwithstanding his declining health and strength, his devotion to both his diocese and parish had continued unremitted. Often during his visitations he would spend one day on a sick bed, and the succeeding in preaching with his usual force and zeal, or in travelling from the place of one appointment to that of another; and while at home, he never permitted a Sunday to pass without occupying his pulpit. This double labor was obviously too much for his reduced strength and health, and the convention, notwithstanding the slender means of the diocese, increased his salary so as to make it adequate to his support independently of any parochial contribution. But the relief came too late. The visitation immediately preceding this convention, was the last he was ever permitted to make to the diocese, which owed so much to his zealous and faithful labors. After the adjournment of the convention, he visited the newly formed dioceses of Tennessee and Kentucky, and from thence went to Philadelphia to attend the sitting of the general convention in that city. This long journey, which he was induced to take at the urgent solicitations of the Tennessee clergy, and perhaps by the expectation that it might benefit his health, he performed in the public stages and steamboats, travelling more than a thousand miles over a rough and mountainous country in the former mode of conveyance. When the general convention had finished its session, he remained for more than a month in Philadelphia, under the care of the most eminent physicians of that city. Their skill restored him to a degree of comfort and health which he had not known for years, and they gave him reason to hope that, with proper care, his health might be completely re-established. But the expectation which they entertained was vain. Though the Bishop, previously to this period, was noted for the recklessness with which he exposed his health and life in the labors of his vocation, he seems to have been impressed by the opinion of these eminent medical advisers with the absolute necessity of more prudence, and thenceforward to have yielded to their injunctions; but a sudden and violent change of weather exposing him to severe cold on an unavoidable journey to Fayetteville, (whither he was preparing to remove,) brought back all the worst symptoms of his disease in an aggravated form. Having disposed of his effects in Williamsborough, preparatory to his contemplated removal to Fayetteville, he reached Raleigh in December, where he designed remaining during the session of the legislature. His health was now, once more, evident-

ly rapidly declining. He was, however, enabled to write a sermon for the consecration of Christ Church, in Raleigh, and to perform that service. After that he daily grew weaker, and his former disease, chronic diarrhoea, returning with renewed violence, and being conjoined with the double quartan, soon prostrated him. In a letter written on the last of January, he says, "I am weakening daily, and now can just sit up long enough at a time to scribble a letter occasionally." "But," he adds, "as respects the result, I am, thank God, free from apprehension. I am ready, I humbly trust, through the grace of my divine Saviour, to meet the will of God, whether that shall be for life or for death; and I humbly thank CHRIST JESUS, my LORD, who sustains me in patience and cheerfulness through the valley and shadow of death."

For many weeks previous to his dissolution, he was fully persuaded that his sickness was unto death, and spoke of his decease as certain, and at no great distance; but manifested the utmost calmness in the contemplation of it. "Why should I desire to live?" said he. "There is nothing to bind me to this world. The last earthly tie has been broken. Nevertheless, I am perfectly resigned to the will of God, either to go or stay. I feel no anxiety about the issue." During the whole of his illness, his conduct was such as to satisfy every one, that he felt no apprehensions at the thought of death. He retained the peculiarities of his character to the last; the same ardent love and zeal for the truth, the same fearless rebuke and condemnation of error, marked his character on a sick and dying bed, which had so eminently distinguished him through life; and he let slip no opportunity of bearing testimony to the truth as it is in Jesus, and as it is held and taught by the Church of which he was a Bishop. "On one occasion," writes the Rev. Mr. Freeman, (who attended him in his last moments,) "several persons being present, I turned to the book of Proverbs, and read to those who were sitting by me the following passage, (chap. 20. v. 21.) *An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed,* and proceeded to observe, how little encouragement was afforded by this passage for a man to make haste to be rich, &c. When I ceased speaking, the Bishop, who I thought was not attending to what passed, exclaimed, 'There is another lesson to be learned from it. It may be applied to those who have hastily obtained a religious inheritance—who place their dependence on those sudden and evanescent fervors which they have experienced in some moment of excitement.' With respect to his own prospects, he appeared to entertain no apprehensions. I asked him, a few days before his decease, if he had never during his illness been troubled with doubts and misgivings? 'Never,' said he. 'So free have I been from any suggestions of the enemy, that I have never doubted for a moment, except that the thought has sometimes come over

me that my tranquillity is possibly an evidence that Satan thinks himself sure of me, and therefore lets me alone.' On my answering, that as he had been laboring to pull down Satan's kingdom—had been constantly engaged in fighting, not in his ranks, but in opposition to him, it was not reasonable to suppose that he had any claims upon him. 'True,' said he, 'but then I have had such a body of sin to struggle against, and seem now to have been so much engaged in preaching myself rather than God, that I feel bumbled to the dust. My only ground of consolation is that as CHRIST suffered in weakness for our redemption, much more may we hope to be saved by the power of his resurrection.' Speaking of his enfeebled state, and what he called the wandering of his thoughts, he remarked on the folly of delaying repentance to a sick bed, and expressed, as he had often done before, his desire to warn every one of the hopelessness of being able to settle on a dying bed so vast a concern as that of making one's peace with God. 'If I had my work now all to do, what would become of me? If I had put off this matter to this time, it must have been entirely neglected.'

"He received the Holy Communion once while on his sick bed, and had appointed to receive it again a few days before his death. But when the time came, he was so much exhausted by the preparations which he had made, and which he would not omit, in order that he might come, as he expressed himself, 'literally clean to the heavenly feast,' that he was obliged to forego the opportunity. 'I am not in a condition,' said he, 'to partake discerningly, and I have no superstitious notions respecting the Eucharist—I do not regard it as a *vaticum*, necessary to the safety of the departing soul. I believe that in my case the will will be accepted for the deed; and tell my brethren (who were assembled in the next room to partake with him) that though I am denied the privilege of shouting the praises of redeeming love once more with them, around the table of our common LORD, yet I will commune with them in spirit.'

"The evening before his death, I had left him for a few moments. Soon after, receiving intelligence that he was dying, I hastened to him, and found him nearly speechless, and sinking to all appearance very fast. I asked him if I should pray. 'I cannot follow you,' was his reply, uttered with great difficulty. I then kneeled down by him, and prayed silently. After some moments, he seemed to revive,

and motioned to us to retire from his bed-side, and leave him undisturbed. I sat and watched him from that time till he expired, which he did about one o'clock the following morning, (March 5th, 1830,) without having spoken for five or six hours. He appeared, however, to be in the entire possession of his mind to the last, and expired without a struggle."

The remains of Bishop Ravenscroft were deposited within a small vault, which had been prepared under his directions some weeks before his death, beneath the chancel of Christ Church, in the city of Raleigh. The following instructions respecting his burial, were found in his will, and punctually performed. "My will and desire is, that the coffin to contain my mortal remains be of plain pine wood, stained black, and without ornament of any kind—that my body be carried to the grave by my old horse Pleasant, led by my old servant Johnson—that the service for the burial of the dead, as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer, and none other, be used at my interment, with the 5th, 7th, 9th, 10th, and 11th verses of the 16th Psalm, to be used instead of the hymn commonly sung; and that the Rev. George W. Freeman, Rector of Christ Church, Raleigh, do perform the said funeral rites."

The following further extract from the Bishop's will exhibits an amiable trait of his character.—"I give to A. M'Harg Hepburn and E. M. Hepburn, whom I have brought up as my children, my servant Johnson, and my favorite old horse Pleasant, believing that they will be kind to Johnson for my sake, keeping him from idleness and vice, but suiting his labor to his infirm condition; and that they will not suffer Pleasant to be exposed to any hardship or want in his old age, but will allow Johnson to attend him, as he has been accustomed to do."

His entire collection of books and pamphlets, which were valuable, he bequeathed to the diocese of North Carolina, "to form the commencement of a library for the use and benefit of the clergy and laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in North Carolina."

To the "Episcopal Bible, Prayer Book, Tract, and Missionary Society," of the diocese, in the formation of which he had taken a very warm interest, he left the copy-right of such publications of his works as his friends might think it expedient to make, which are now collected in the volumes to which this Memoir is prefixed.

THE EARLY PERSECUTIONS OF CHRISTIANS.

FIRST CENTURY.

PART I.



N arranging a sketch of the early persecutions it becomes necessary to determine whether to consider them under the titles of *first*, *second*, *third*, and so on to the tenth, according to a very generally received method, or adopt some other plan more strictly in accordance with the tenor and truth of history.

The number is greater than ten, if we include the provincial and more limited persecutions. But if we reckon only the general and severer ones, the number is fewer. The prevailing computation seems to have taken its rise in the fifth century; and with some probably well-disposed individuals, who reached their conclusions more through an arbitrary interpretation of prophecy than by historical evidence. Lactantius, in the fourth century, makes mention of only six persecutions. Eusebius, though he enters into no formal enumeration, appears to mention nine. The same number is adopted by Sulpicius Severus, in the fifth century: he prepares his readers, however, for the infliction of the tenth and last by Antichrist at the end of the world. From that time, *ten* embraced the popular idea.

The truth seems to be that not more than four or five of the emperors were guilty of the deliberate and unrelenting persecutions which are so freely set down to the disgrace of as many more. It is allowed that there were numerous other instances in which Christians suffered because of their belief in their divine Master and devotion to his cause; but it is more than doubted whether they should be included in the list of the generally severe and prevailing afflictions which stand

out on the pages of ancient records as the peculiarly bloody and striking evidences of the hatred of Heathenism to the Gospel.

Under the convictions thus expressed, and because we would not appear to slight any trial or form of adversity endured by the early followers of our LORD, it is deemed best to arrange our details and comments with reference to the *centuries* in which the persecutions were encountered, rather than with respect to their relative place or rank in any numerical classification.

The first persecution suffered by the Christians at the hands of the Gentiles, began about the middle of November, A. D. 64. It continued until the death of its imperial instigator, in A. D. 68. Its duration was, therefore, about four years. As Nero is, on all hands, conceded to have occasioned it, a preliminary consideration of his character and some parts of his life is deemed an important if not necessary portion of these inquiries and discussions: and though to some it may assume the appearance of an episode, our notions of duty impel us to enter upon it.

When Nero succeeded Claudius on the throne of the Roman empire, he gave promise of being the blessing and delight of his people. He was but seventeen years old when he began to reign; and yet he had already established a reputation worthy of the pupil of the philosophic Seneca. For nearly five years he administered the government in a way deemed fit to be held up as a pattern for all princes. Had he continued to govern with the same virtue to the end of his days, but few names in the annals of mankind would have been brighter than his. The famous emperor Trajan used to say, "That for the first five years of this prince, all other governments



RIGHT REV. JOHN STARK RAVENSCROFT, D.D.

Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church

OF THE DIOCESE OF NORTH AND SOUTH DAKOTA

ENGRAVED FOR THE EDITOR

